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ABSTRACT

Adult basic education (ABE) and literacy programs have used many different strategies and tools to recruit new students. A small sampling of Tennessee ABE programs shows the more effective recruitment strategies are word-of-mouth referrals; newspaper advertisements and articles; fliers; brochures; posters, radio messages, and public service announcements; and outdoor signs and billboards. Other issues that influence recruitment of adult learners are motivation (including oblivious, uninvolved, resistant, focused, eclectic, and comprehensive motivations); relevance; age-related issues; and sources of referrals, especially from ABE program partners. The best method for recruiting adult learners that do not currently participate in ABE and literacy programs is probably a multiple strategy approach that uses several techniques simultaneously. Identifying a clear target market of adults whom one wishes to recruit is essential to prepare the proper materials for the recruitment process and to train individuals who are recruiters for the program. Studies, research, and practical experience make apparent that the most effective techniques tend to be those that use direct, face-to-face (personal) contacts with potential adult students and describe valuable program services that clearly meet the needs of the adult learner. (Contains 28 references.) (YLB)

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Recruitment Issues and Strategies for Adults Who Are Not Currently Participating in Literacy and Adult Basic Education (ABE) Programs

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Introduction

Recruiting new students for an adult basic education (ABE) or literacy program is a complex issue dealing with many components: How do you reach the right people?, What programs should you offer?, Where and how often should the classes be offered?, How does one address the many issues that adults face (transportation, child care, work, time constraints, health concerns or other special needs) ? Another topic that many ABE programs confront is that only a small portion of the total adult population in need of additional educational services actually participates in a continuing education, ABE, or literacy programs (Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, 1995; Quigley, 1987). So how does one reach these people?

In this paper, I will discuss some techniques, tools, and strategies for recruitment of adult students using various marketing and public relations methods. I will refer to some of the techniques that Tennessee ABE programs have used and consider the effectiveness of various marketing strategies overall. Finally, I will address other issues related to adult recruitment and list possible suggestions for strategies that one may wish to test in their own ABE or literacy program.

Marketing and Public Relations for Recruitment

Many different strategies and tools have been used by ABE and literacy programs to recruit new students. Some examples are provided in the following list (Baker et al., 1991; Balmuth, 1988; Davis, 1989; DuPrey, 1992; Iowa State Dept. of Public Instruction, 1974; Irish, 1980; Galbraith, Sisco, & Guglielmino, 1997; Learning Resources Network, 1988; Maravilla, 1993; Martin, 1989; Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, 1993; Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, 1995; Rosynek, 1993; Smink & Bridal, 1993; Spencer, 1980; Stark, 1993):

- Brochures, Pamphlets, Books, Fliers
- Posters

- Store Window Displays
- Bulletin Boards
- Inserts in Mailers
- Direct Mailings (such as letters, postcards, etc.)
- Newsletters
- Newspaper Advertising and Feature Articles
- Displays, Exhibits, and Booths at Community Events and Fairs
- Outdoor Advertising- Signs and Billboards
- Radio Messages
- TV Spots
- Public Service Announcements (PSAs), Press Releases
- Open Houses
- Telemarketing/Telephone Committees
- Computers, on-line access and homepages
- Award Ceremonies and GED Graduations
- Statewide 1-800 Number Referring Adults to Local Programs (this was generally not considered very effective - direct contact with a specific program was better)
- Speaking to community, civic, social, church, and other local groups
- Referrals from students, schools, employment agencies, Department of Human Services and other service organizations, businesses, civic organizations, and many others
- Other Word of Mouth Referrals (friends, family, peers, teachers, and other members of the community)

This is not a complete list, but it does include many of the common activities that help promote one's program and attract new students.

Many of these techniques are currently utilized by ABE programs in Tennessee. Which of them are more effective? From a small sampling of TN ABE programs, the more effective recruitment strategies were word-of-mouth referrals from students, friends, businesses, service organizations, or other community sources, newspaper advertisements and articles, fliers, brochures, posters, radio messages and PSAs, local TV station/cable channel spots, and outdoor signs and billboards. Johnson City's ABE Program was able to use a city electronic sign located in front of the school and on a main highway and was very successful in recruiting many new students through that medium.

Looking through the education literature and studies on recruitment strategies, two major categories of strategies were discussed. These categories were designated as personal and non-personal contacts (Balmuth, 1988; Martin, 1989). Personal contacts were consistently mentioned as the primary source of successful recruiting and include methods such as word of mouth (referrals from friends, family, students, teachers, and other community members) and door-to-door canvassing using students, teachers, or recruiters (professional, paraprofessional, or volunteers). Door-to-door canvassing can be individuals or teams of individuals. However, canvassing will be most successful if the recruiters are perceived to be trusted members of the community and/or individuals from similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds as the adults who are being recruited for one's ABE program (Larson, 1980; Learning Resources Network, 1988; Maravilla, 1993). In order to establish the necessary trust and better make connections between the ABE program services and the adult student's needs, goals, and life situation, personal (face-to-face) contacts are highly recommended. Secondary sources of successful recruiting are called non-personal techniques. Some of the more effective non-personal strategies include newspaper

advertisements and articles (especially with human interest stories), radio messages, newsletters (primarily prepared by the students or including student stories/articles), posters and fliers (displayed in businesses, churches, community centers, schools, grocery stores, malls, pubs, banks, YMCA/YWCA, civic clubs or organizations, and libraries), and referrals (from social agencies, welfare, employment offices, schools, libraries, businesses, and other ABE program partners).

Other Issues Influencing Recruitment

What other issues influence recruitment of adult learners? This is not a simple question with only a single answer. The adult student population is as complex as the population of the U.S. as a whole. Many family, cultural, social, and work related issues affect an adult's decision to enroll in an ABE or literacy program. A detailed marketing analysis of an ABE program's geographic area and the characteristics of the specific groups of adults that one wishes to attract must be completed in order to best meet the needs of those adults and develop appropriate marketing materials and strategies.

One adult characteristic that has been studied in much adult recruitment literature is motivation. How are adults motivated (or not motivated) to attend continuing education programs? Motivational factors are sometimes broken into several categories: oblivious, uninvolved, resistant, focused, eclectic, and comprehensive (Houle, 1985). The oblivious motivation refers to people who are unaware of the ABE program. The uninvolved person may be aware of the existence of the ABE program, but may not participate due to time constraints or lack of interest. The resistant motivation (this topic will be further elaborated later) involves adults who are generally aware that programs are offered, but "resist" enrollment in the programs. Focused people have very specific goals in mind for their education, such as obtaining a GED or a driver's license. Adults with an eclectic motivation may have a variety of

interests and goals that need to be met. A comprehensive motivation may be a need for a complete, well-rounded education (i.e., reading, writing, math, and other basic skills).

In order to best motivate adults to participate in an ABE or literacy program, the program must be learner-centered- addressing the needs and interests of the adult students. The "value" and benefits of the program must be clearly evident to the potential student. Thus marketing materials should be used that "make connections" to the interests, needs, and goals of the adult learners. Understanding the target population is essential to the recruitment process. If the program anticipates working with adults from urban or rural areas, then marketing materials may need to address specific topics of interest. In an urban area, issues such as public transportation, crime, and housing may be relevant topics of interest. Adults from rural areas may be interested in farming, weather, and specific community issues. For families, materials related to childcare or booklets for new mothers/single parents could be made available (and distributed in pediatricians' offices, for example). Often, gaining employment or getting a better job are high on the list of adult priorities so programs may need to focus on job-related issues such as resume preparation, the interview process, specific job skills, vocabulary/terminology used in various jobs, application forms, accident reports, promotion reviews, or job description paperwork.

Delving further into the subject of adults with a resistant motivation factor, resisters are seen as a unique group of non-participants in traditional ABE programs. They are thought to "reject part or all of the schooling system by refusing to participate in part or all of the schooling program. In turn, they embrace an alternative set of values and/or an alternative life-style to that advocated by schooling" (Quigley, 1987, p. 20). Resisters may have had very negative schooling experiences and as a result refuse to participate in current programs of which they may already be aware. Even if an ABE program has a good reputation, they may still not participate (Quigley, 1993). A negative, previous schooling experience could have been due to distrust or

lack of support from peers, teachers, or administrators or from the textbooks utilized in the classroom. Resistance can also be characterized as rejection of the values of the "dominant culture" (political, social, moral, or emotional norms valued by the majority) that are "taught" during lessons in an ABE program (whether directly or indirectly). A resister may not want his/her values questioned (or value their own set of norms) and may seek acknowledgment that their past experiences and value systems are valid. The ABE program would best serve these adults through facilitation of learning which does not impose the value systems of others upon them. The individual would be free to reflect upon his/her value system and determine if those values were in conflict with the new knowledge and meanings they are integrating into their experience (Beder, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Quigley, 1987).

Other ways to attract resisters to an ABE program involve establishing recognizable program benefits for the individual and focusing on learner needs and goals. In some cases, less emphasis on the classroom structure itself may need to be promoted. The use of transitional strategies have been suggested to accomplish this: organizing in-home groups where a host or hostess volunteers their home as a meeting place to help a new student (or student group) become familiar and comfortable with an ABE program or matching a new student with a one-on-one tutor initially and then introduce them to a classroom environment when they are ready (Irish, 1980). Another strategy is to provide peer or tutor mentoring support during student orientation and the early stages of the learner's introduction to the ABE program. In general, providing affirmation and positive feedback are essential support mechanisms that attract and encourage retention of resistant adults (pertains to many adult learners). Another way to de-emphasize a negative schooling experience is to offer either on-site workplace education or classes at a community college [which may be seen as more prestigious or less intimidating than a public school environment] (Beder, 1980; Seaman, 1971).

Other considerations relevant to the discussions of learner-centered ABE programming may be age-related issues (Martin, 1989). Although adults have many common needs and goals that extend across much of the life span (i.e., getting a job or a better job, improving job skills, or obtaining a promotion), other needs may be relatively unique to certain age periods. Younger adults and recent high school dropouts may not only be interested in jobs or job-related learning (i.e., obtaining a GED), but may also be interested in "pop culture" such as current music, literature, TV, sports, and games/videos. Middle-aged adults' interests include raising children, family planning or counseling, and hobbies or other specific activities. The older student population is often overlooked in ABE program planning considerations (Spencer, 1980). Older adults may be retired or have little interest in work-related learning. Their interests might involve learning to read to their grandchildren or reading the bible for themselves, learning about current or new hobbies, being able to socialize with others, or retirement and health issues. The older adult population can also be a good source of volunteers for ABE program tutors, mentors, or office staff.

Referrals, as previously mentioned, are yet another effective recruitment method and will be further discussed here as they refer to ABE program partnerships. The partnerships that a program develops and nurtures with other organizations can be a great source for referrals to an ABE program as well as being of mutual benefit to the organizations involved in the partnership (Beder, 1980). Maintaining "active" partnerships is especially recommended to get the most out of the relationship. Partners should be fully educated about the ABE or literacy program and completely committed to supporting it (Irish, 1980). Although the partner's goals can differ somewhat from the ABE program's goals, a good relationship can still be nurtured and maintained with adequate preparation, education, and a clear agreement about the nature of the relationship. One should maintain frequent contact with partners (face-to-face, if possible) and

provide feedback and updates on the ABE program as necessary. If one can ascertain a specific person at an organization to thank for a particular referral or good deed, then it is a good policy to thank that person specifically for his/her help.

Other Ideas for Recruitment

Many different ideas for recruiting new students to an ABE or literacy program have been discussed so far in this paper and many others still exist. Here is a list of additional suggestions found in the education literature from research and studies and obtained from other ABE personnel:

- Contests for Recruitment
- Student Group Recruitment Night or Open House
- Organize a March for Literacy
- Distribute Booklets Targeting Mothers, Workers, Farmers, or Other areas of interest
- Video Display in a Supermarket
- Placemats in Restaurants or Fast Food Establishments
- Bookmarkers in a Library
- Advertisements in Welfare Checks
- Surplus Food Distribution Center Recruitment
- On-site Workplace Education
- Workplace Closed-Circuit TV Advertising
- Pizza Box Fliers
- Restaurant Menus
- Weekly Sample GED Question in the Local Newspaper
- GED Lessons on Cable TV

- Illustrated Bar mats in a Pub or Club
- Calendars
- Hosting a Parade, Fair, or Special Community Event
- Printed Grocery Bags
- Special Displays at a Grocery Store
- Refugee or Migrant Program Referrals
- Women's Shelter Referrals
- Free-standing Displays for Malls or Public/Community Area
- Radio Talk Show Using Students
- Advertise the Program's Technology (Some Adults Want to Learn to Use Computers and Software Programs)

(Baker et al., 1991; Learning Resources Network, 1988; Nurss & Chase, 1989; Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, 1995; Riecke, 1994; Rosynek, 1993; Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1994).

This is not a comprehensive list, but provides more ideas that can be used (if suitable) for student recruitment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the best method for recruiting adult learners that do not currently participate in ABE and literacy programs is probably a multiple strategy approach that uses several of the techniques mentioned in this paper simultaneously. Identifying a clear target market of adults whom one wishes to recruit is essential in order to prepare the proper materials for the recruitment process and to train individuals who are recruiters for the program. It is apparent from studies, research, and practical experience that the most effective techniques tend

to be those that utilize direct, face-to-face (personal) contacts with potential adult students and describe valuable program services that clearly meet the needs of the adult learner.

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